

# ESP: Back to Methodology

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Although our Course for Customs Officers (CCO) was set up almost 50 years ago, it was only in the 1980s that it became part of the Polytechnic Institute of Oporto, granting bachelor degrees.

English has always been part of the CCO curriculum. Until about five years ago, however, the syllabus followed a structural, grammar-based approach, with topics falling within the scope of what is usually described as General English, i.e., no subject-specific materials were used. This approach had a negative effect on students' motivation towards English. To begin with, all our students have a scientific background and usually consider themselves as "very bad at foreign languages." Their past experience as language learners, unsuccessful in most cases, creates a biased attitude towards the subject, which neither the content nor the methodology of the old syllabus helped to dispel.

Low motivation of students, shown by a high level of absenteeism and occasional outbursts of negative comments, led to a re-evaluation of the syllabus. Some steps were taken to find out about our students' target needs, and an effort to confer some face validity was carried out by including thematic units such as Travel, Transport, Going through Customs, Import/Export, Banking and Insurance, etc. Although this incipient new syllabus managed, at least to some extent, to boost students' motivation, it is now clear to me that the changes were mainly cosmetic and that further adjustments are called for. It seems that neither adequacy of topic according to specialization nor a close interpretation of data yielded by an analysis of the target situation necessarily guarantees students' motivation, or, for that matter, effective learning.

## Materials Design

As I have mentioned above, the main criterion my colleagues and I established for selecting materials for the CCO was appropriateness of topic. But somewhere along the arduous process of collecting bits and pieces from a large number of sources (both authentic materials and textbooks), methodological considerations often have been relegated to a secondary position. The potential of the materials as tools for learning and as generators of lively, intellectually engaging activities has been overshadowed by our concern to give English equal standing with the other subjects in the curriculum, a goal we assumed could only be achieved by overloading the syllabus with subject-specific, target-related information. Our main misconception, as Swales neatly puts it, was that "we thought much of materials, less of methodology, and little of expectations" (1984:15).

## Subject Knowledge

It is now widely accepted that the ESP teacher should not be expected to be an expert in the students' specialty. However, it has also been said that it falls within our professional

requirements to be at least interested in the subject, either for purely intellectual or more practical reasons.

What happens in my teaching situation, as I am sure is common to many ESP situations, is that teachers of English in the CCO have amassed a considerable amount of information about our students' specialty. There is no reason why this knowledge should not be put to use in the English classroom; in fact, our students usually appreciate it as a sign of both our interest in their subject and our recognition of the relevance of their field of study.

However, I have come to realize that although our specific knowledge may be used to advantage, it should be handled carefully in the ESP classroom. To begin with, the ESP teacher should resist the temptation to act as an expert on the subject, for the common-sense reason that his/her knowledge, so often picked up in a superficial and piecemeal way, may result in the loss of face and possibly of confidence on the part of the students. Secondly, the teacher should not be lured into using highly specialized materials, whose language and content s/he can hardly grasp, let alone be conversant with.

## **Materials for the CCO**

At this point I will present a sample of the kind of teaching materials I use in the CCO, which I think clearly illustrate the shortcomings referred to with regard to methodology. I will then try to show alternative ways to exploit the material, bearing in mind students' wants and learning needs. The suggestions for tasks are not intended as a set recipe for all the materials used in my situation. On the contrary, flexibility should be the key word for classroom activities, and teaching materials should (gracefully) allow for changes in order to accommodate different circumstances.

The idea of using a Table of Duty-Free Allowances, which may be found in any airport, is taken from John Eastwood's *English for Travel* (1980:27-8) and is a good example of what I call productive material, since it can easily be adapted and used for different purposes and at different levels, depending on the tasks devised. As it is, its main advantage lies in its authenticity and relevance to the students' target situation. The author presents five short descriptions of different situations, followed by a simple question, as in the example:

You are arriving in the UK from Copenhagen. You have 75 cigars which you bought at a shop in the city. Will you have to pay duty?  
(Eastwood 1980:28)

However, these exercises are not entirely satisfactory, as they (a) do not promote student-student interaction, (b) rely solely on reading/interpreting, (c) do not promote creative use of language, (d) do not require further manipulation of input, (e) take but a couple of minutes to solve, and (f) offer no real challenge or enjoyment. The following suggestions are an attempt to make up for these shortcomings.

## Useful Activities

*Competition 1.* My first activity is to organize a competition, using situations similar to those presented in the book. Working in pairs, the students will listen to the situation, consult the table, and work out the right answer. The winner will be the pair that takes the shortest time to come up with the right answers. The first activity will concentrate on listening and will give the students the opportunity to become familiar with the content of the table.

*Competition 2.* The second task is based on a favorite quotation of mine, namely that “teacher overload often entails learner under involvement since teachers are doing work learners could more profitably do for themselves” (Allwright 1981:11).

In groups of four, the students will be asked to write their own situations on cards; the number of situations will vary according to time available and size of the class. Human nature being what it is, I am sure that each group will try to make their situations as tricky as possible. Then a spokesperson from each group will read one situation for which the other groups will try to provide the right answer within a given time limit. If no right answer is provided, the group that came up with the situation will have to justify the answer they think is right. The winner will be the group that scores the highest number of correct answers.

*Roleplay.* The last activity is a roleplay between a Customs Officer and a passenger (so we go back to pair work here). All the situations written by the different groups that require payment of duties will be collected (the teacher should have some more up his/her sleeve in case there are not enough of them), and each pair will get two cards.

At this stage, and as a preparatory activity for the roleplay, you can have a brainstorming session, with the teacher eliciting from the students and writing on the blackboard exponents for the main language functions required for such a dialogue (as, for instance, *persuading*, *appealing*, *disagreeing*, *compromising*, *arguing*, *apologizing*, etc.). The tone of the dialogue, especially the degree of politeness adequate to the situation, will also be discussed and agreed upon.

The students will then be asked to roleplay the dialogue. As passengers all over the world resent being asked to pay import duties, I am sure that the student playing the passenger will try his/her best to get away without having to pay anything. The pair will change roles for the second dialogue. To avoid having the whole activity become repetitive and tiresome, you can distribute cue cards to each student with hints at their reactions, such as *slightly annoyed* or *furious* for the passenger, or *polite but firm* or *understanding* for the Customs Officers.

## Comment

These activities are but suggestions to improve what I consider to be a good example of potentially good but not fully exploited materials.

Although it has been said that materials do not necessarily have to be related to the students' specialty, and even that their use can be counterproductive, our CCO students do appreciate

dealing with practical aspects of customs procedures (like going through Customs at an airport). This fact seems to be disregarded in the content of other subjects in the curriculum.

As to the activities themselves, I tried to devise tasks that hopefully will involve the students more actively, by providing opportunities for them to actually use the language in what I expect will be a challenging, engaging way. Special attention was paid to the speaking skill (in the third stage of the lesson, the roleplay) to cater for the students' wants as far as the speaking skill is concerned, although the other skills (listening, writing, and reading) were not neglected. It remains to be seen, of course, whether these activities will work in the ever-changing, unpredictable scenario of the classroom.

## Conclusion

Running the risk of overlooking one of the most passionate issues in ESP, I would suggest that the question does not so much lie in the content of the materials (i.e., whether they are subject-specific or not), but rather in what you do with them in the classroom. Furthermore, it is not enough for materials to be interesting or up-to-date: they should above all be linguistically and communicatively relevant to the learning situation, they should foster students' interest and promote learning. I would go further and say that it is not only the nature of the materials but the methodological exploitation of them, including tasks and activities, that needs careful attention.

## References

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